

Beowulf Synopsis and Focus Questions

Hrothgar

Grendel

Beowulf

Edgetho

Unferth

Welthow

Ester

Wiglaf

Prologue

What is the death ritual performed when the old king dies?

1. When Hrothgar assumes rule over the Danes, he builds Herot, a mead-hall.

What purpose does Herot serve?

Describe Grendel. What are his origins?

2. Each night after the warriors fall asleep, Grendel visits Herot.

What actions does Grendel take against Hrothgar's men? How long does this go on?

What is safe from Grendel's destruction? Why?

3. Beowulf sails from southern Sweden to the land of the Danes and is met on the shore by a guard.

Why did Beowulf offer to help the Danes? How many men accompany him?

What is the guard's main concern?

4. Beowulf tells the thane why he has come and approaches the famous mead-hall.

Why does the guard allow the visitors to go forward with all of their weapons?

5. Beowulf and his warriors are described and outside the mead-hall explain again why they have come.

What is the Danes' response to these men?

6. Hrothgar, the king of the Danes, remembers Beowulf is, and knew him as a child.

How does Beowulf explain his qualifications for fighting Grendel?

7. Hrothgar tells Beowulf about the devastation at Grendel's hands.

Describe the characterization of Hrothgar as he narrates this story.

8. Unferth, a hero of the Danes, taunts Beowulf.

What is Unferth's claim?

How does Beowulf explain his bet with Brecca?

9. Beowulf continues to tell stories justifying his heroism.

How does Beowulf turn Unferth's insult around onto Unferth?

How does Welthow respond to Beowulf's boasting?

10. Everyone celebrates the presence of Beowulf and they all settle down to an evening of drinking. All the soldiers fall into a drunken slumber except Beowulf.

What choice does Beowulf make about how to confront the monster? Why does he make this choice?

11. Grendel comes out of the marsh and approaches Herot, the mead-hall.

What does Grendel realize once he touches Beowulf?

Describe the fight between Beowulf and Grendel.

12. Beowulf has torn off the monster's arm, but the monster slips away to his den to die.

Why are swords useless against Grendel's skin?

How does Beowulf publicize his victory?

13. In the morning, the Danes follow Grendel's tracks back to his lake home. The story of Siegmund's battles are also retold here, to compare Beowulf to other heroes.
Describe the public reaction to events in the previous chapter.

14. Hrothgar offers his gratitude to Beowulf and Beowulf retells the story of the fight.
How does Unferth respond to Beowulf's proof of his bravery/heroism?



What are the major traits of this heroic task? How does Beowulf prove himself as a warrior?



What do you predict will happen to Beowulf in the remaining portion of the story?

15-18 There is rejoicing and the story of the fight is told over and over. Treasure is brought out for the hero. More tales of valiant struggles are told during the celebration.

19. The king departs with his queen and the warriors fall asleep. Grendel's mother appears.

How does Grendel's mother compare to Grendel? What does she do in retaliation? How does this affect Hrothgar directly?

20. Hrothgar tells Beowulf what happened to Esher and asks Beowulf to help out again.
What offer does Hrothgar make Beowulf if he will take on Grendel's mother?

21. Beowulf prepares to pursue Grendel's mother.

What is Beowulf's stated main goal in his life? Does it seem a good one for a hero?

What is Hrunting? How is it significant that Unferth offers it?

22. Beowulf kills one of the many monsters in his way and meets up with Grendel's mother.

How is Beowulf's armor useful but his sword not?

How do Beowulf's prior exploits uniquely prepare him for this journey?

23. Beowulf finds a tool that will assist him.

Describe the battle with Grendel's mother.

24. Beowulf tells the story of his victory to the Danes. Hrothgar then tells of a former king who went against the Danish custom by not giving rings to his subjects.

How does Hrothgar's story further emphasize the values of the time period?

25. This section contains advice for Beowulf. More treasure is bestowed upon him for his recent deed.

What specific advice does Hrothgar offer Beowulf? (It concerns 'pride.')

26. Beowulf desires to return home and promises to come back if Hrothgar ever needs him again.

What is the prediction made of Beowulf?



What are the major traits of this second heroic task? How does it compare to the first task? What additionally does it prove about Beowulf's ability as a warrior?



Other than killing the two creatures, what are three additional results of Beowulf's journey to the Danes?

27-31 Beowulf arrives home in the southern part of Sweden. His uncle Higlac is glad to see him. Beowulf recounts his exploits among the Danes and shows his uncle all the treasure. His uncle is impressed. We learn more Geat history. Eventually Higlac and his son die, and Beowulf becomes king and rules wisely and well for fifty years. A local slave then stumbled upon a huge stone tower, home of a dragon and a huge hoard of gold he had been guarding. The dragon, outraged, goes on a torching spree, threatening Beowulf's lands.

32. The slave's motivations for stealing the cup are explained, as is the origin of the hoard of gold.

How does the dragon embody the greed of "sharing out no treasure" that Hrothgar had warned against?

33. The depth and breadth of the dragon's anger against the theft is described, and Beowulf remembers his efforts in his uncle Higlac's war.

Describe the dragon's actions.

34. Beowulf remember other recent wars. Beowulf vows to go against the dragon and save his people.

How has Beowulf's tone changed as he's about to face the dragon?

35. Beowulf prepares himself for the fight with the dragon.

What is different between this fight and the others (against Grendel and his mother)?

36. Wiglaf comes to Beowulf's aid. The dragon has ripped into Beowulf's neck with his teeth.

What is Wiglaf's history? His personal traits? Why does he believe he (and others) should help Beowulf?

37. Wiglaf goes into action to help Beowulf, who manages to kill the dragon.

What is the importance about the way the dragon dies? What is Beowulf's request before he dies?

38. Wiglaf performs all the duties Beowulf orders before his death.

What are Beowulf's last words at his death? What is the significance of the "end of the era"?

39. Wiglaf goes to inform the hiding companions of Beowulf's death to shame them for their cowardice.

What does Wiglaf say will be the result of the others' cowardice?

40. All the nations that have kept away from invading the Geats out of respect of/fear for Beowulf will soon overrun their country.

Who all will begin likely begin invasions on the Geats?

41. Wiglaf recounts the long-past history of war between the Geats and the Swedes. Any peace treaties are over since the death of Beowulf. The teary-eyed warriors go and find the dead body of their hero.

What does Wiglaf say should happen to the dragon's gold? What is ironic about this choice?

42. The fate of the gold and the fate of Beowulf's body is decided.

How does Wiglaf direct the funeral pyre to be made?

43. Beowulf's body is laid to rest.

How is Beowulf remembered by his people?



How does this last heroic task compare? What does it show the audience that Beowulf is killed?